

Our interview with Dr. Fantin on Tuesday, November 4th provided us with a lot of useful information. Dr. Fantin, in 1999, set up a disability resource center (DRC) in Russia's Novosibirsk State University. The center helped individuals with visual and other sensory impairments as well as mobility issues. Dr. Fantin stated that even in a fairly advanced country like Russia, there were still a lot of stigmas and stereotypes geared towards individuals with disabilities.

When asked if the general public was receptive to the establishment of a DRC at the university, Fantin said that people were receptive mainly because he and his colleagues were bringing the ideas and resources (especially funding), and if they had not provided the means, such a program would not have been likely to develop on its own.

Fantin said that challenges he faced in setting up the program included cultural stereotypes and discrimination that develop as a cultural fear and repulsion of disabilities. These feelings, he said, would sometimes be publically expressed.

Fantin stated that it is unproductive to have concerns or ideas that devalue the capabilities of human being and it is a real challenge to break through these preconceived notions, but it is surely worth the effort.

Additionally, Fantin shared an anecdote from his experience in implementing the DRC. He said, "when we started the DRC at the university there, the idea was to help capable students attend the university and while there, get the resources they needed to be academically successful, such as wheelchair accessibility." A course that is usually taught to visually impaired individuals at a young age is called "orientation and mobility" course. However, it appeared to Fantin that blind people in Russia had not had such training (had not taken such a course). Blind people were house-bound with usually no concept of independent travel. Fantin was completely surprised by this as he had been travelling independent with the use of a walking cane for such a long time.

He mentioned that there was a great deal of reluctance/fear on the part of the blind people themselves to take on the task of independent travel, which Fantin found discouraging. He felt that the blind people didn't have the spirit to actually believe they could function without a guide. Fantin said that this was understandable to some extent because of the usually poor weather conditions in Russia as well as the presence of haphazard sidewalks.

Lastly, Dr. Fantin helped us come up with ideas for our project:

- Find young people who have disabilities and give them opportunities to travel elsewhere and become educated in US and Europe. More education and an exposure to possibilities allows the young people to go back to their countries and influence their communities in a positive way. This way, they can alleviate the stigmas and stereotypes. There is an NGO called **Mobility International USA (MIUSA)** based in Eugene, Oregon which is an exchange program that takes capable, bright students with disabilities living in US and sends them to a developing country, and brings capable, bright students with disabilities living in developing countries, to the US.

-**Scholarship funds** to bring capable, disabled people from Nepal to Western countries to receive an education. These people would be most capable of influencing the people of their country to change the perspective of disabilities.

-**Influence through technology** such as recycled cell phones that will allow blind people in Nepal to get in touch with the world through internet connectivity – also education programs online.

-**Get in touch with Marc Krizack** who has connections to the DRC in Novosibirsk and also works for an organization that makes low-cost wheelchairs.